

I asked my brother for a special breakfast, which included French toast, eggs over easy, corned bean hash, and a tall glass of milk. After all, it was the first day of seventh grade and I knew it was going to be different this year. Over the summer, I had read the entire Harry Potter Series, practiced my basketball handles and shooting, and got my black belt in TKD. Plus- I was going to be in all honors classes! I was ready for anything! After the long summer, I couldn't wait to finally get back to school.

After quickly gobbling down my last piece of toast, I grabbed my backpack and walked with confidence to the bus stop. I noticed some new faces, along with the usual neighborhood kids. I checked them out as we waited for our ride. There was a short, chubby boy with long curly hair and a rolling backpack. Another kid, who looked like a high-schooler, with a buzz cut and a pencil behind his ear, waited at the curb too. Usually, no one spoke to each other, just stared at the street or the sky, until it was time to go. I didn't want to start out the new year in the same way, so I introduced myself first. I found out that the kid with curly hair was Joey, and crew-cut was Adam. They both had just moved here and were going to be in my grade too. I was glad I made two new friends, even before school had officially started.

Finally, the bus came and I hoped that Troy, my worst nightmare, the kid who made my life miserable in sixth grade, wasn't there. I kept my head down and walked as fast as I could down the aisle to find an empty seat, but just when I thought I had found a safe spot, Troy found me. He pushed his way to my side and sandwiched me against his backpack and the school bus window. He gave me his death stare, as he slowly started picking at a hole in the vinyl seat in front of us.

"So Jacky boy, did you miss me?" He laughed and snorted at the same time and I began to remember my sixth grade nightmare. I felt my face starting to get hot and red. Troy liked to destroy things, he was especially good at crushing my ego. Bully Boy Troy. I noticed that he hadn't grown over the summer, I stood up and I was actually taller than him now. I decided not to answer him and found my way to another seat. It was next to Adam, my new bus stop buddy. Of course Troy followed me, but stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Adam and his big arms. I smiled and Adam gave me a thumbs up. We both laughed then. I was glad that I had decided to talk to the new kids that morning.

When we pulled up to Liberty Middle School, I felt a ball hit the back of my head. It was Troy and his buddies, trying to bully me again. This happened all of last year, and even though I felt stronger now, it still hurt. I tried hard to hold back my tears, and somehow I managed not to show them.

Thankfully, I managed to get through the first half of school without bumping into Troy. When lunch period came around, I spotted Joey, sitting by himself at an empty table. I had a flashback and remembered that that boy used to be me, so I walked over to his table and sat down. I wanted to make sure Joey had a good first day. He was glad to see me and as we talked, it turned out that we had a lot of things in common. Joey liked to read too and he was on his last Harry Potter book! I could tell that we were going to be great friends. Things were looking incredibly positive.

English was great because we got to write about our favorite summer reading books. At gym, I found out that basketball tryouts were going to be held after school in

two weeks and I was extremely prepared. Then the last bell rang, and all my excitement slowly turned to despair. I really didn't want to go home...

Walking home from the bus stop, thinking about my goals and new found confidence, I felt a smile growing on my face. But it faded away in the instant that I reached the big black front door of my house. I was almost more afraid of what I would find inside than I was of Troy.

Even though it was only three-thirty in the afternoon, with the sun still shooting its rays of shine, my house was dark and musty. No one ever bothered to open the curtains or sweep the floors since my mom had gotten sick. I looked over the den, and saw my dad in his usual place on the couch, half asleep. Around him were empty bags of chips and crushed cans of his favorite beverage. I didn't want him to notice that I was home, so I crept up the stairs, stepping on the parts that didn't creek, and found my way to the room my older brother Noah and I shared. He didn't know it, but I considered him to be my best friend.

When I noticed the huge white sneakers, neatly tucked behind the bedroom door, I knew that Noah was already home. I was looking forward to telling him about my first day, but when I saw him curled up in bed, with the blanket covering his head, I knew that something was terribly wrong. "Wha-at's go-going on?" I stuttered, as I pulled on the covers.

Noah looked up and I saw the places on his face where the tears had dried up. "She's gone Jack..." I knew instantly that he was talking about our mom. Before, when I said Troy was my worst nightmare, it wasn't actually him, but the day when I would find out that my mother would never be coming home. Today, was my worst nightmare.

We hugged each other and spoke about how mom was in a better place now, where she could forget about suffering and pain. We opened the curtains and windows, and for a second, it felt like the gentle autumn breeze, flowing into the room was our mother, whispering that she would always be with us, and we cried.

After the funeral, my dad began cleaning up the house. He finally started to open the windows and draw the curtains. We had people come over everyday with food and well wishes for our family. We realized that our dad had been depressed about my mom's sickness for a long time. Ever since she had gone away to the hospital, he had stopped working and stopped being a dad. It wasn't his fault that he was sad. Noah and I both decided to forgive him.

I missed school for two weeks. I had almost forgotten about my dreams and goals for seventh grade after my mom died. Going to school was going to be hard, but I knew I had to go back and face my fears. At the bus stop that day, everyone told me how sorry they were for my loss. I politely said thank you, but couldn't wait for school to be over so I could come home and be alone with my thoughts.

At school, Joey and Adam sat with me at lunch and talked about basketball tryouts. I had almost forgotten about them. They knew I had been thinking of trying out for the team and convinced me to go to the gym after school. I finally agreed to go, but without the excitement I had had the first day. Also for some reason, Troy was nowhere to be seen that day, and I was relieved. It was one less thing to worry about.

I went to tryouts and did well during the scrimmages. I was still hoping to make the school team, but even if I didn't, I would be fine with it too. Then I remembered that my dad had told Noah and I that we had to go somewhere after school today. When I got home on the late bus, they were waiting for me in the car. "Let's get going Jack, we don't want to be late," my dad said.

I didn't bother to ask where we were going, but we were there before I knew it. We parked in front of a tall, white building that looked like a hospital. It was a place where people went to get support through difficult times. We walked in and found a red door that read "Loss of a Loved One Support Group". I looked inside and saw a very familiar face.

Sitting in the circle of chairs, was the one and only, Bully Boy Troy. I was surprised when he smiled and nodded when he saw me. I went and sat in the empty chair next to him and my dad sat next to his dad.

We were going to do a sharing exercise. As we went around the circle and talked about our losses, I found out Troy's mother had been sick with cancer for a long time, just like my mom had been. When it was his turn to speak, he told the group how his sadness had turned into anger and how he tried to hide his feelings by bullying kids in school. He turned to look at me and paused for a second. He didn't want people to ever think he was weak or know he was sad. He said he had been wrong by treating others badly because he couldn't control his own pain. Troy said he missed his mom, and I think I saw a tear creep out his eye. I missed my mom too.

After the meeting, Troy waited for me outside. He slowly walked up to me to say that he was sorry. He was sorry about my mom and sorry about bullying me. I felt that Troy's "I'm sorry" was the most genuine "I'm sorry" that I'd heard since my mother's passing. I nodded and we silently forgave each other that day.

The seventh grade passed by very quickly. Joey became class president and Adam and I became best friends. Did I mention that I was voted MVP on our school basketball team too? Oh, and Troy moved away mid-year, but we still keep in touch through XBOX and texts. We became non-enemies, friends actually. I learned a lot in seventh grade, like solving algebra problems, writing short stories, dunking basketballs, and how to make new friends. But the most important life lesson I learned was that people aren't truly bad, but sometimes their situations can be. And that people can always change for the better, if you give them a chance. I learned to forgive.